

Promoting oral language development in Early Years settings: An exploration of current practice

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Abstract

Early years education helps to build a sturdy foundation for the whole of a child's life. Similarly, language and communication underpins learning across the early years foundation stage (EYFS), its importance is reflected in the EYFS curriculum and in recent national initiatives (ICAN and RCSLT, 2018). The number of children with additional needs in language and communication is growing with children from socially disadvantaged groups at greater risk (Law et al., 2017). Increasing levels of need and growing waiting lists are putting pressure on Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and early years practitioners (EYPs) are providing a lot of support in this area, though understanding of what this looks like is limited (Dobinson and Dockrell, 2021).

This presentation explores what universal language and communication support EYPs are providing for all children they work with, and the increasing amount of targeted support that is being delivered to children identified as being at risk of additional needs (Ebbels et al., 2019).

We explore evidence from the Language Intervention in the Early Years project (LIVELY), a randomised controlled trial evaluating the efficacy of two early language interventions (Building Early Sentences Therapy and an adapted version of the Derbyshire Language Scheme), which ran in North East England from January 2020 to May 2022 (McKean et al., 2020). Qualitative interviews were conducted with eleven of the participating settings to explore their existing practices in supporting language development with children aged between three and five years old. Four settings were interviewed again to probe some of the practices they described in more detail.

LIVELY considered whether interventions could be delivered by EYPs and, if so, what the role of SLTs would be. Interviewees were asked to consider this, as were the researchers who delivered the interventions, all trained SLTs, and a local authority SLT. While the LIVELY project was focused on two interventions, the interviews allowed us to explore language and communication support more broadly.

Data is still being analysed but we have already identified a number of key themes. We will continue to explore these and consider implications for future research.

Interviewees described how they provide language enriching environments and activities, however, many early years practitioners initially overlooked some of the ways they and their settings were providing support, suggesting that much knowledge is implicit. Many of the principles they adhere to are unspoken. While it is reassuring to see that support for language and communication is being normalised in many settings, questions are raised about whether an approach relying on implicit

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knowledge is appropriate for ensuring all early years settings are equally able to provide support for all children. The LIVELY team have used information gathered from the interviews to produce a best practice booklet that can be shared with other settings to provide suggestions of how to support a child's language and communication skills (Preston et al., 2022). The aim was to recognise and celebrate the work EYPs were doing and to make this knowledge explicit.

Interviewees also provided evidence of how they are increasingly providing targeted support for children at risk of language and communication difficulties; support that would traditionally have been provided by SLTs. While there is evidence that support provided by education practitioners can be effective when staff are well trained and supported (Ebbels et al., 2019), interviewees described variation in EYPs knowledge and understanding of language development. Providing targeted support for a growing number of children is challenging especially when children may have different needs and require different programmes that do not have similar goals.

One important area is identifying which children require support and selecting appropriate programmes. Some children are referred to SLTs for assessment leading to resources being provided for the setting to use. However, for some children the assessments used to identify them as needing additional support were conducted by the settings. We consider whether all EYPs have the knowledge and expertise to make these judgements and deliver programmes, especially as some of the chosen interventions were originally designed to be delivered by specialist SLTs. Are resources being targeted at children who will benefit the most?

We explore how well the partnership between SLTs and EYPs is working. Are they collaborating in a way that ensures their respective areas of expertise are used appropriately and in the most effective way? Is partnership working focused on the needs of the professionals or the needs of the children (McKean et al., 2017)?

References

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Themes

- Inclusive Education and SEND
- Second Theme
- Literacy and Language